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A CRITICISM OF PEDAGOGICAL FADS IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

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No one who is interested in education in a broad way can afford to ignore the Sunday school, for after the public school it is certainly the most influential formal influence in shaping the moral life of our country. To it English-speaking peoples, whether of the church or not, owe a great debt of gratitude for what it has accomplished in this very practical way. But in spite of all that simple justice requires one to say of the valuable result of its work, it is true that many of its plans and methods are open to very severe criticism on psychological, pedagogical, and practical grounds. This, of course, is primarily due to the fact that its great army of teachers—one and one-half millions in number in the United States alone—are all volunteers, and that they have taken up their work practically without training. The organized educational forces with which their efforts have allied them have done practically nothing to train them for greater efficiency. The fact that state universities, undenominational colleges, and normal schools are beginning to offer definite instruction for Sunday-school teachers is an evidence of the change of attitude that is appearing, largely as a result of the agitation and effort of the Religious Education Association.

Growing out of the antagonism between religion and science at the time when the modern educational movement began, and in the Sunday school fostered by conditions mentioned above, a strong tendency to separate instruction in the truths of religion from every other educational effort grew up, and still has very large influence. When we have taught a child these things it has been chiefly on one day of the week, in one building set apart for that purpose, and from one sacred book. Specialization and concentration have their value, but their dangers as well; it is not strange that there have been unfortunate results of this isolation of religious instruction from

everything else in life. Had the public schools recognized and emphasized the moral aim as they ought to have done, the outcome of these conditions would have had less significance for those outside of the church. As it is, the inefficiency of Sunday-school practice has brought loss to our social whole.

One result of this aloofness from other educational life on the part of the Sunday school has been the persistence of antiquated methods. For example, the catechism of formal questions and answers, which in the period of dogmatic theology was used in giving instruction in many branches but has long been abandoned in every phase of education but the religious, is still used and defended. More valuable methods are rapidly taking its place, but that this still persists unduly in some quarters is evidenced by the fact that there has recently come to the writer's hands the written statement of the official Sunday-school leader of one of the more important denominations to the effect that this is the ideal method of religious education for children under five years of age! Another illustration is found in the still common practice of using one uniform passage of Scripture for study by all grades of the school, whether the pupils are three or seventy-three years of age.

But these errors belong to a period that is rapidly passing and it is the newest tendencies that are to be very briefly discussed. These have grown out of a reaction against the loyalty to outworn methods which has just been mentioned. For the last few years many influential leaders have realized that the Sunday school has suffered from its failure to profit by the general advance of educational thought and practice, and there has been strong effort to remedy the error. It is not strange, in view of the conditions, that this has led to a rather indiscriminate adoption of methods and devices used in the public schools. Because the Bible is literature, and because it deals to some extent with history and geography, the methods of literary, historical, and geographical study have been introduced into the Sunday school, and thus the moral and religious aim has often been obscured and sometimes defeated. For this blunder secular educators have often been at fault in more than a negative way. Criticizing the Sunday school, they have insisted that the principles and fundamental methods of education are the same whether they are applied in the Sunday

school or the public school, whether one teaches Shakspeare or the Bible. The obvious truth of this statement has made it influential while the fact that it is a very broad generalization has permitted it to be misleading. The difficulty has been that neither the Sunday-school teachers nor their critics of the public schools have realized that not all of education is embodied in the textbooks or the formal methods of our present-day systems. The principles of moral and religious education have hardly yet been formulated, and certainly they have not as yet been agreed upon by any body of educators. When we know what they are we shall discover that the splendid moral influence of our public schools has been wrought in harmony with them, though not by formal methods that are consciously based upon them. When secular education has formulated its methods of moral education it may demand that they shall be accepted by the Sunday school.

Theoretically the danger of using for one educational purpose a method that has been shaped for another is obvious at a moment's thought. An educational method is always a means to an end. It stands between educational principles and an educational aim, but is shaped more largely by the latter. The influence of the aim is positive, constructive, definite; that of the principle is broad and general, and in practice is often restrictive rather than suggestive.

The practical difficulties in the case in hand are easily illustrated. A prominent educator, basing his suggestions frankly upon his ideals for literary study, recently said that if he could control the Sunday school he would dismiss the large body of teachers and hire a good reader to present the Bible in selected readings to the whole school. This would practically eliminate the element of personal influence which is one of the most valuable factors in moral education, and which has doubtless been the strongest force in the Sunday-school work of the past; for however much Sunday-school teachers have neglected other educational principles they have followed that important one which says, "Be what you would have your pupils become." Other plans of literary study which no better serve the the purpose of the Sunday school have been adopted in textbooks and in schools. Plans of study based upon the accepted ways of teaching history have been used. Adolescent pupils, in that period

of life when they respond so strongly to the teachings of Jesus, and when a single month may bring spiritual transformations that could not be wrought in years at an earlier or later period, are kept tracing on complicated charts his journeys through Palestine, or are employed in working out the synchronism of the kings of Israel and Judah. Usually whatever moral and religious significance one of these lessons has could be indicated in three sentences by the teacher, and could be found by him in the published work of any competent commentator.

One of the very prominent recent fads, largely due to this same desire to be "pedagogical" in the Sunday school, is the great emphasis upon modern methods of teaching geography. More than one of the recent systems of Sunday-school lessons has provided a whole year of geography lessons; some would introduce geography lessons from time to time in the ordinary courses; and others would have supplemental geography lessons associated with all or nearly all of the biblical instruction given between the ages of eight and eighteen. Maps are to be modeled in sand, clay, and paper pulp. Prepared outline maps are to be colored to indicate the political divisions and the physical features of the lands; details of rivers, cities, and routes of journeys are to be added; and finally original maps are to be constructed with great accuracy and neatness. And all of this in spite of the fact that the usual Sunday school provides for lesson periods of one-half hour per week through ten months of the year! As long as the public schools do not teach the geography of Bible lands (which would certainly be quite as appropriate to its function as to teach that of Greece or Rome, for we owe as many of our ideals to the Hebrews as to the Greeks or Romans) some geography should be taught in the Sunday school, and what is worth doing at all is worth doing well; but everything in the way of formal instruction that is necessary for ordinary intelligent study of the Bible can be given in a comparatively brief time, and as incidental to other lessons, somewhere between the tenth and fifteenth years.

The latest fad, which partly grew out of that last mentioned, deals with "manual work" or "expressional activities." Every child from the kindergarten up must have a notebook. In this the youngest trace words and paste pictures. Those who are a little older color the pictures and write the titles and perhaps simple texts. The next

grades write summaries of the lessons and decorate the notebooks. Whole sheets of ornamental borders are furnished. These are cut out by the pupils, pasted on the pages of the notebooks, and colored after the style of the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Pupils who are still more mature cut up Testaments and by pasting construct harmonies of the gospels, using one of the best printed harmonies as a model. All of these activities, if they do not require too accurate and long-continued work, as is too often the case, are unobjectionable in themselves, but their relationship to the aims of the Sunday school is very remote at best. What it really is may be traced as follows: The Bible should have a place in the Sunday-school curriculum because of its moral and religious content; that this moral message may be fully comprehended some knowledge of the history which is contained in the writings and out of which they grew is necessary; as an aid to the comprehension of this history some knowledge of geography is desirable; the modeling of a map is one of the valuable means through which geographical knowledge may be gained—and that is precisely the nearest relation that map-making ever bears to the real aims of the Sunday school. And with the making of notebooks and all the rest of the manual work the relation is exactly the same. So far as they can be used to this end they are legitimate and desirable, but in many schools today they overshadow all else in the instruction. It may be added in passing that the most labored analysis fails to discover any relation between the pasting and coloring of the ornamental borders in the notebooks and the real aim of the Sunday school. It is possible that late in adolescence such work might be done in the spirit of the old monks, but surely never in case of the children between eight and twelve years of age for whom it is recommended. At all events, that mediaeval form of worship has been rejected by the modern church in favor of what it believes to be better ways of glorifying God; to revive it would be honoring the letter above the spirit in a most literal way.

All these activities, and others, have been urged by rather thoughtful leaders, who are really anxious to profit by the best in educational method, as applications of the principle of motor expression, which is beginning to mean so much in secular education. Every impression received in the class, they declare, must find expression in the activities

of the pupil; these are the activities used in the public schools; doubtless they are the right ones. Again, the principle is valid and of fundamental importance, but the difference of aim requires a different application. It is true enough that a moral lesson has never been learned until it has been lived, but that suggests something other than a notebook and a box of water colors. I have been told of a class of boys who on Sunday studied Bible heroes and pioneers of history and on Saturday played pioneers, dramatizing in an informal way the lesson of six days before. The lives of the pioneers are suitable lessons for the inculcation of moral heroism in boys and girls, but the real "expression" should be found in the lives of the children at home and at school in every form of play, not in the revival of the crude material and the superficial form of the lesson instead of its spirit. Sometime we shall not only relate the instruction more sympathetically and definitely with everyday life, but shall also learn to make the tactful guiding of young people in simple and informal service to those about them a vital integral part of the Sunday-school curriculum. Then, and only then, shall we apply that most important principle in our Sunday-school work.

In the various efforts to secure the gradation of the Sunday school there is manifest the same desire to profit by the experience and the thought of secular educators. Some of them are almost ludicrously crude and mechanical, yet they are the evidence of this worthy aim. A curiously widespread conception of the graded school is that its fundamental principle is to make the lessons for each grade a little harder than those of the next preceding one. Since it is possible that these words may sometime come under the eye of one who holds that view it may be said that it is no more difficult for the girl of nineteen to fall in love than for her sister of nine to play with her doll, but it is a very different thing, and one more appropriate to her time of life. Upon corresponding differences of interest and impulse in the moral and religious life the gradation of the Sunday school should be based.

In other circles gradation is based wholly upon the passing of examinations on the work prescribed for each grade, which may be and often is exceedingly ill-adapted for children of the age at which they are expected to take it. This not only ignores the vital principle of gradation, but applies what is practically a memory test as the basis

for promotion. Again, in many of the best schools the pupil is assigned to the same grade in the Sunday school as that to which he is assigned in the public school. This plan, which is often indorsed and recommended by public-school teachers, is almost as crude a blunder as those mentioned above. Whether it should be so or not, the pupil's grade in the public school is determined almost entirely by his intellectual attainments. The Sunday school exists for training in morality and religion, and these are essentially matters of the emotional life. The intellectual test, particularly when it deals with attainments rather than development, has no great value here. The man of fifty who cannot read does not belong in the primary class of the Sunday school. He must live a man's life, solve a man's problems, and fight a man's battles: he will receive most help in a class of men. He will be hampered at times by his lack of elementary education, but here is his place, and no one would refuse it to him. But the same principle applies with equal force to the dull child who misses a grade in public school but physically and morally and religiously continues to develop as do others of his age. The age and size of the child are quite as significant as his place in the public school, and commonly afford a more accurate test of moral and religious development.

The true basis for gradation in any school is found in the fact that in developing human life there are successive stages in which different opportunities are offered to the teacher. Successful gradation consists in so ordering the educational effort that each opportunity shall be used to the utmost as it appears. Gradation in the Sunday school should include four steps: (1) the separation of the pupils into groups on the basis of the general development of their moral and religious natures, as far as this can be ascertained; (2) the selection of lessons which shall be designed especially to meet the needs and opportunities of these various stages of religious development; (3) the selection of teachers in view of their fitness to deal with particular grades, and the provision of training which will enable them to become specialists in their particular fields; (4) the organization and management of the school in such a way as to facilitate the three steps just mentioned. On the basis of such simple and fundamental conceptions as these it would seem to be possible for the Sunday school to shape plans which

would really further its own work, instead of aping in a superficial way what is done in the public schools.

The last few years have added very largely to the number of courses of study designed for use in the Sunday school, and there has been real progress toward the production of a worthy curriculum of moral and religious education. A very few of the books, judged by the strictest psychological and pedagogical tests, seem quite as good as the better texts used in the corresponding grades in the public schools; the majority fall below this level, and a considerable number seem so defective in conception or in execution as to be unworthy of use.

Among those who have recently sought to prepare curricula covering several grades of the Sunday school there has commonly been some knowledge of modern educational principles (a qualification which until very recently was wholly ignored), and partly because of this, and partly because tradition has prescribed the content of religious education more rigidly than the method, there has been less blind following of the public schools than in method and gradation. There are, however, some serious faults due to what appear to the writer to be misconceptions of the aim of the Sunday school.

To leaders in certain circles the purpose of the Sunday school is to prepare for church membership. Where this is the case it is not strange that the ritual of worship, the church year, and the church doctrines should dominate the whole scheme of instruction even for the youngest children, and that there should be little or no effort to provide for pupils who are over fifteen or sixteen years of age.

To other leaders the Sunday school is a Bible school in the strictest literal sense: its aim is to give a knowledge of the sacred book. Several prominent curricula that appear as rivals to the international system illustrate this tendency by unduly emphasizing the effort to give familiarity with the content of the book from the point of view of the development of the Hebrew religion and the Christian church, or from that of modern critical Bible-study. These curricula offer very good courses, and are doing much to prepare the way for better ideals and materials of religious education; some courses such as they have provided the Sunday school surely needs: but before anything like the ideal curriculum can be approached there must be a broader basis for its determination. The aim of character-building,

the bringing to perfection of the moral and religious nature of the child, the youth, the man, must be accepted as the fundamental purpose of the school, with recognition of the church and the Bible as means to this end—but not the only ones. The Bible will doubtless remain the chief textbook of the Sunday school, but we must recognize the fact that God has not revealed himself through Hebrew prophets and Christian apostles alone. In nature and in biography, in history and in science there are lessons that do not claim inspiration for themselves, but that are as truly messages from God. They have both a moral and a religious significance, and it must not be ignored.

The old theological curriculum has practically passed away. The ecclesiastical and the strictly biblical (which makes knowledge of the Bible rather than response to its teachings the end of the instruction) must also pass. The one which shall worthily supersede them must be one that seeks to foster and further the unfolding of the whole higher nature, providing such lessons as will interpret to the pupil his own moral and religious experiences, guide him through the various crises of his moral and religious development, and provide for healthy expression of his moral and religious impulses.

We have as yet but an imperfect knowledge of the facts that must indicate what such a curriculum should be, for they can be discovered only by careful study of the developing moral and religious life; but such studies as have been carried on for a dozen years at Clark University, more recently at the Hartford School of Religious Pedagogy, and sporadically in other institutions, have given a fair basis for a beginning, and the influence of such generalizations as can now be made is in some degree apparent in the best of the most recent attempts at curriculum making.